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ABSTRACT

Critical consciousness is essential to the praxis of a democratic culture. Both composition and literature instructors on the college level may be using the reflective or dialogue journal under the false assumption that recursive writing leads naturally to critical thinking. Experience with college sophomores indicates that the narrative pressures inherent in journal writing seem to work against critical analysis. Cognitive psychologists have shown that to learn critical thinking skills, the following elements must be present: a focus on teaching a specific thinking skill within the content area, the presence of teacher mediation to help students create meaning, and assignments that include framework and scaffolding whereby the teacher models the thought processes, gradually shifting the responsibility for higher order thinking to the student. Teacher interventions to mediate cognitive processes and model critical thinking in the college literature class can take the form of such frameworks as "dialogue folders" wherein on-going dialogues with the text, with themselves, and with peers are recorded and reflected upon. The kind and quality of thinking in student dialogue folders can become an important focus of instruction. In addition, in cooperative learning groups, the roles of each of the members of the group must be clearly defined to facilitate critical thinking of all members (an adversary, a synthesizer, a caretaker, a recorder, and a liaison). (Two appendixes outlining a thinking skills model and cooperative learning group roles are attached.) (SR)

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Say It Again Sam: Recursive Writing and Critical Thinking in the Literature Classroom

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Say it Again Sam: Recursive Writing and Critical Thinking in the Literature Classroom

In *The Dilemma of Modernity: Philosophy, Culture and Anti-Culture,* Lawrence Cahoone responds to the question, "What is a democratic culture?" in this way: "It is a culture in which plurality, diversity, and creation of new cultural themes and traditions are not only tolerated but encouraged." Furthermore, "democracy stakes its existence on the conviction that open, free, and never-ending discussion can bring together its disparate cultural elements, not in agreement, but simply in the act of communication between equally free citizens"; "(it) is a gamble that the act of on-going communication and open deliberation as a form of self-rule is a sufficiently integrative force, regardless of the degree of disagreement and discord in the discussion. [1] This paper is premised upon the strong conviction that critical consciousness is crucial to achieving full literacy and that it is essential to the *praxis* of a democratic culture. The question I will address is: how do we as teachers of literature promote critical thinking in the college (or secondary) classroom?

Recursive Writing and Critical Consciousness:

Much has been written in the past decade about the relationship between recursive writing and critical thinking (concept formation, higher order thinking). Recursivity or the "recursive nature of the meaning-making process" has been called by various names : dialectical (I.A. Richards and Lev Vygotsky in A. Berthoff), reflective (Fulwiler), dialogical (Bakhtin), and cognitive sterioscopic (Bleich). [2] In her discussion of the triadic (mediated) nature of all perceiving, thinking , or interpreting, Berthoff offers the clearest explanation that I've read for the recursive nature of the meaning-making process:

> The two [triadic models] I consider most useful are perception and dialogue. Every course I teach begins with observation--with looking and looking again. . . . Looking and looking again helps students learn to transform things into questions; they learn to see names as "titles for situations" . . . . In looking and naming, looking again and re-naming, they develop perspectives and contexts, discovering how each controls the other. They are composing; they are forming; they are abstracting."

With regard to the second triadic model, dialogue, she maintains that

> The "natural environment" necessary to the growth and development of the discursive power of langauge requires dialogue. Looking again starts that questioning which is the beginning of dialectic. . . . Dialogue is essential . . . because it can model the constant movement from the particular to the general and back again which for Vygotsky is the defining characteristic of concept formation. [3]

In this paper, I will discuss my research in a sophomore level course in writing and literary criticism for English majors at the University of Colorado, Boulder from 1986-1989. There, I asked my students to experiment with various approaches to journal writing and cooperative learning groups in an attempt to test these theories about the recursive writing and the meaning-making process. My goals in this class were: to offer social contexts for writing about literature, to promote an awareness of the interpretive process, and to stimulate higher order thinking, in addition to the metacognitive leap toward thinking about one's thinking. This paper, oddly enough, is an amalgum of ideas resulting from my successes and failures in

achieving those goals, my on-going reflections on changes I hope to make in the future, and my unshaken belief in keeping the dialogues going. I will be focusing, in particular, on some tentative conclusions I have drawn about my students' journal writing and cooperative learning groups as means to fascilitate critical thinking.

Developmental Pedagogies and Teacher Intervention:

Since one of my goals was to fascilitate higher order thinking through journal writing and cooperative learning groups, I would like to review briefly some areas of disagreement in the area of developmental pedagogy on this subject. The first question I had to answer for myself was: can college sophomores, left to their own devices, perform higher order thinking (sporadic evidence suggests they can)? And, assuming that they are able to do so, is this faculty the product of a natural course of development that evolves deterministically in fixed stages (Piaget); or, is it inborn and operative in all human beings, not requiring teaching (Walker); or, finally, is it both inborn and operative, but requiring teacher intervention in making the transition from concrete to formal operations (Vygotsky, Berthoff)? [4] Convincing research in cognitive psychology suggests that while children from a fairly young age do use abstract thinking (and higher order thinking), an automatic transition from concrete to formal operations may not occur without teachers teaching them how to do it (i.e., modeling the transfer). As Berthoff has written:

> In my opinion the ambiguities of the determinism suggested by any account of natural, normal development can serve as the hinges of our thinking about thinking in the interest of

> discovering the laws of growth, the interdependency of nature and nurture, seed and soil. Language and learning, like syntax and semantics, are in a dialectical relationship which we must learn to construe and represent so that it is accessible to our students" (Berthoff, 1984, 752).

The Need for Nurture--Teachers modeling Critical Thinking:

I think many college Composition and Literature teachers have misused journal writing by assuming that critical thinking following naturally from the mere activity of writing and reflecting. There has been a tendency to step back and let students lead the process--often finding that they don't have a clue as to where to start or proceed. We may be placing too much emphasis on "nature" the student's inner dialogue, thus overlooking that dialectical thinking requires constant "nurturing" (modeling) of specific thinking skills. [5] As A. Berthoff observes, "our students find generalization (concept formation) difficulf . . . because nobody ever taught them how to go about it" and "our students are uninstructed in looking and looking again at what they read and write; in noting likes and differences; in attending to what varies with what." [6] The transfer of abstracting from the "world" to the "word", as cognitive psychlogists have found, is far from automatic, far from "natural," and is heavily dependent upon teacher modeling and mediation (see Beyer, Feuerstein, Swartz).

How to Fascilitate Critical Thinking:

How can teachers fascilitate critical thinking skills in the literature classroom? First, there is the now-familiar dialectical notebook (Berthoff) where a student enters into a dialogue with him/herself. Yet, while teachers

may have embraced this or other journal keeping frameworks to "allow" or "fascilitate" critical thinking, many of us may have forgotten Berthoff's repeated injunction "to show our students how to use what they already do so cleverly in order to learn how to generalize--how to move from abstraction in the non-discursive mode to discursive abstraction, to generalization" (Berthoff, 1984, 750-51). Or as Barry Beyer, Professor of Education, maintains, the kind of thinking instruction that occurs in most classrooms (such as frequent writing in journals or other types, worksheets, debates, etc.) will not effectively develop thinking skills. Rather, what is needed is for teachers to introduce explicit thinking skills and to provide for modeling the skill and explaining the steps in using it (Beyer, 1987).

We won't get a white sauce by waiting for the ingredients to integrate, synthesize, or coalesce by themselves and, analogously, we won't consistently see higher order thinking in our students' journals unless we provide modeling, scaffolding, or questions ("assisted invitations") that promote *specific* higher order thinking skills. Over the past three years, I have asked English majors in my sophomore level writing and literary criticism course to keep a journal (the formats have varied over the past three years, including the dialectical notebook) and to reflect upon earlier entries, noting continuities and changes in responses and interpretations. Being a "naturalist" and clinging to the Vygotsian belief in the idea-generating power of language, I more or less assumed that, with some small effort on their parts, 19 and 20 year old college students could "spontaneously generate" critical thinking merely by writing and rewriting, looking and looking again. Despite my dogged determination, the incidences of abstract or critical thinking remained sporadic, at best, and regularly called out for intensive teacher interventions in the form questions that pushed for a number of different types of thinking about a piece of literature: inductive or deductive

reasoning, drawing inferences, causal explanations, sorting and opposing, and posing problems in interpretation. The experience has changed me into a "nature/nurturist."

Why Journals Fail:

Research shows that there may be cognitive reasons for the failure of journals *used without teacher interventions* to fascilitate critical thinking, based on what I would call the narrative pressures in journal writing that resist, or do little to encourage, dialectical thinking. In addition to these narrative pressures, research also shows that concrete thinking dominates adolescent thinking over formal (abstract) thinking, and that there is not an automatic transition from concrete to formal thinking. This transition may be fascilitated through active experiences (e.g., learning structures and cognitive modeling). Active or experiential learning methods of instruction from K-12 have largely overlooked this fact, leaving children more or less on their own to generate formal analysis out of their concrete thinking (non-discursive abstracting) experiences. The transfer from the concrete sphere of experience to the formal (discursive abstract) may never occur.

Educators for secondary education are beginning to see the need to "help the student make the transition from simple narrative to analytical writing." To do so, they maintain, students need a framework which will guide them until it can gradually be removed. [fn. This framework may take the form of: (1) an external intervention to organize thinking (matrixes, graphs, journals, folders), (2) cooperative learning structures (Jigsaw, Team Learning, Group Investigation, Home Groups), or (3) Teacher as mediator or model thinker to help students make meaning (Ennis, _1987). According to Applebee's findings, "rarely is such a framework provided, although research shows that the

student does not automatically leap into analysis. As Cheatham, in an article refuting Piaget's developmental model, has written,

> The problem, it seems, is that middle school, high school, and even college educators assume without foundation that students should be able to write more and more analytically as they grow older (according to Piaget's model). There is, however, no automatic transition from concrete to formal operations. It requires active experiences and related instruction. [8]

A major difference between low and high achieving students may very well be that high achieving students have had access to more or better mediated learning experiences than low achievers. Traditionally, the primary caretaker provided these mediated linguistic/learning experiences, [9] but (generally speaking) this cognitive scaffolding provided in the home has increasingly fallen away. Over the past twenty years, with the decrease both in the quality and duration of interactions between parents and children (both parents working, single parent families); with increased television viewing (which is a passive, unmediated linguistic and cognitive experience); and the absence of critical thinking frameworks integrated into instruction in the school, according to the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989): "students at all grade levels are deficient in higher order thinking skills." [10]

Three Frameworks to Fascilitate Critical Thinking:

(1) The first framework I devised was the course design itself, which was based upon a variety of recursive writing assignments generated from three

kinds of dialogues. These dialogues, recorded on loose leaf paper and collected in separate folders, included: (a) the student's on-going dialogue with the text; (b) the inner dialogue of the student with him/herself as thinker and meaning-maker (what kinds of thinking, how to develop more higer order thinking, reflecting upon how and why responses changed, posing interpretive problems and hypotheses about an interpretation and about the nature of the interpretive process); and (c) the social dialogue between the student and his/her peers, usually in small cooperative learning groups. [11]

(2) Using "dialogue folders" in place of a journal or learning log, served three purposes: (1) to dramatize and enact the recursive processes involved in developing a critical consciousness, (2) to create an awareness of the interpretive process, and (3) to offer resistance to the narrative pressures exerted by journal writing, in general. (fn. Bartholomae and Pertrosky). To these ends, I drew up a list of "Thinking Goals" for student's (initially with the teacher's guidance) to use to reflect upon their initial responses and thinking in folder #1 (dialogue with the text).

The thinking skills fell into two groups: lower order thinking skill (LOTS) and higher order thinking skills (HOTS). (See Appendix A.) Each student was asked to go back to earlier entries and identify the types of thinking they used and, then, to explore what they has written by trying out a skill from the HOTS list to direct their thinking in later entries. Needless to say, in the early stages of this experiement requires conferencing and teacher-guided practices were essential. But, after some practice students were internalizing the meta-cognitive analysis and were able to choose at will from the menu of higher order thinking skills. Several weeks into the semester, they could relfect upon their meta-cognitive experiences and discoveries in dialogue folder #2 (inner dialogue about thinking and meaning-making).

(3) Cooperative Learning Groups and Social Dialogue: The last framework I used was the dialogue folder in which each student recorded the social dialogue with his/her peers in small cooperative learning groups. Each student's task for group work was to pose an interpretive problem that had emerged from their dialogue with the text or inner dialogue. It might include any of the following strategies: speculating or hypothesizing about what an image/symbol means, what motivates a character, the meaning of repeated images or classes of images, comparing or contrasting a character with someone s/he knows or with another literary character.

In groups of five or six, students took turns discussing their interpretive problems and getting feedback from members of their group. Each member of the group was given a specific role designed to push all the students in the group to higher orders of thinking. (Problems without role assignment and individual accountability). For example, each group was composed of the following roles: an adversary, a synthesizer, a caretaker, a recorder, and a liasion (optional). Along with a role (which might be rotated throughout the semester), each student received a list of suggested questions to fascilitate them in their role. (See Appendix B.)

In their dialogue folder on group discussions, the student records and reflects upon responses in agreement and disagreement with his "interpretive problem" and hypothesis. In the folder, s/he will collect data concerning supporting and contradictory evidence, write responses to alternative interpretations, and make note of any changes in his/her original hyposthesis. In this way, the student returns through writing and dialogue with peers to an interpretive problem and hypothesis, thereby taking the first strides toward developing an argumentative paper. While students are working on their interpretive problems in groups, I like to ask them to

submit a preliminary interpretive paper (first hypothesis and how they arrived at it through their reading and dialogue folder writing). Later, after group work has been completed, students may need to add scholarly research to their argumentative papers. The final paper should reflect all the stages in the process I've outlined, in addition to formal research.

Conclusion:

Both composition and literature instructors on the college level may be using the reflective or dialectical journal under the false assumption that recursive writing leads naturally to critical thinking. My experience with college sophomores indicates that the narrative pressures inherent in journal writing seem to work against critical analysis. Cognitive psychologists have shown that to learn critical thinking skills, the following elements must be present: a focus on teaching a specific thinking skill within the content area, the presence of teacher mediation to help students create meaning, and assignments that include frameworks and scaffolding whereby the teacher models the thought processes, gradually shifting the responsibility for higher order thinking to the student.

Students in middle school, high school, and even college have not had sufficient guided and independent practice in using higher order thinking (discursive abstraction and generalization) and we ought not assume that the transfer of abstraction from concrete experience to abstract/formal thinking will occur automatically. Teacher interventions to mediate cognitive processes and model critical thinking in the college literature class can take the form of such frameworks as "dialogue folders" wherein on-going dialogues with the text, with themselves, and with peers are recorded and

reflected upon. The kind and quality of thinking in student "dialogue folders" can become an important focus of instruction in the form of "Thinking Goals" incorporated into the recursive process. In addition, in cooperative learning groups, the roles of each of the members of the group must be clearly defined so as to fascilitate critical thinking of all members. Pressures for shallow consensus of the group ("group think") can be overcome by building divergent thinking into the group dynamics.

In conclusion, I return to the idea with which I began: that critical consciousness is essential to the *praxis* of a democratic culture, Again, Cahoone observes, "Democracy is not a final perfect state of human relations to be achieved and maintained; it is a 'method,' as Dewey saw, a process of interaction which attempts to solve communial problems. This method of discussion is hypothetical, experimental, and never-ending; it makes no claims on a 'final solution.' Because every individual must have access to the forum, the debate cannot be arbitrarily controlled or limited, and nobody has the last word" (Cahoone, 270-71).

Notes

[1] Lawrence E. Cahoone, *The Dilemma of Modernity: Philosophy, Culture, and Anti-Culture* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 270.

[2] I. A. Richards, *Speculative Instruments* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955), and Lev Vygotsky, "Development of Scientific Concepts in Childhood" in *Thought and Language*, trans. and ed. Eugenia Hanfman and Gertrude Vakar (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1962) and *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, ed. Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner, and Ellen Souberman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978); Toby Fulwiler, *Teaching with Writing* (Boynton/Cook, 1987) and Fulwiler, ed. *The Journal Book* (Boynton/Cook, 1987); Mikhail Bahktin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Helquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); and David Bleich, *Convergences: Transactions in Reading and Writing*, ed. B. Petersen (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE).

[3] Ann E. Berthoff, "Is Teaching Still Possible? Writing, Meaning, and Higher Order Reasoning," in *College English*, vol. 46, no. 8, (Dec. 1984), 743-755.

[4] See J. Piaget, "Intellectual evolution from adolescence to adulthood" in *Human Development*, 15, 1-12; Jeffrey Walker, "Of Brains and Rhetorics," in *College English*, vol. 52, no. 3, (March 1990), 301-22; see especially p. 316 where he concludes that "if neurology suggests anything, it suggests. . . that even the most inexperienced, weakest, and seemingly dumbest student writers generate complex lines of reasoning, although that reasoning may be unreflective or naive or clumsily articulated"; and Vygotsky cited in Berthoff (1984).

[5] See several essays in *Thinking Skills Instruction: Concepts and Techniques* (National Education Assoc. Publication, 1987): A. Swartz, "Critical Thinking Attitudes and the Transfer Question," 58-68; D. Halpern, "Thinking Across the Disciplines: Methods and Strategies to Promote Higher-Order Thinking in Every Classroom," 69-76; B. Beyer, "Practice is Not Enough," 78-86; and R. Feuerstein, Miller, Hoffman, Rand, Mintzker, and Jensen, "Cognitive Modifiability in Adolescence: Cognitive Structure and the Effects of Intervention," 189-201.

[6] Ann E. Berthoff, "Reading the world. . . Reading the World: Paulo Friere's Pedagogy of Knowing," in *Only Connect*, ed. T. Newkirk (Boyton/Cook, 1986).

[7] Applebee, A.N., *Contexts for Learning to Write: Studies in Secondary School Instruction* (Norwood, N.J.: ABLEX).

[8] Judy Cheatham, "Piaget, Writing Instruction and the Middle School," in *Middle School Journal* (March 1989), 14-17.

[9] J. Bruner, "The Course of Cognitive Growth," in *American Psychologist*, 19, 1-15.

[10] The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Washington, D. C., 1989), 27.

[11] L.D. McNeil, "Logging the Interpretive Act: Dialogue in the Classroom," in *College Teaching*, vol. 37, no. 3, Summer 1989.

L.D. McNeil, "Recursive Writing and Critical Thinking"
APPENDIX A: Thinking Skills--Modeling the Transfer

J.P. Guilford, "The Structure of the Intellect," *Psychological Bulletin* 53 (July 1956): 267-93.

Lower Order Thinking Skills (LOTS)	Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)
Cognitive-Memory: recognize, recall, define, recount, repeat, quote, identify, answer yes/no	Convergent: analyze and combine remembered info., translate, interpret, relate, explain, compare/contrast, associate, conclude, summarize Divergent: hypothesize, speculate, devise, infer, predict, imply, synthesize, solve, pose Evaluate: form opinion, judge, rate, make/defend a choice

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Examples: Thinking modeling for writing about Sophocles' *Antigone:*

Lower Order:

identify: Antigone is _____'s daughter (niece, bethrothed, sister).
define: Antigone (Polyneices, Ismene, Creon) is a _____ (e.g., Classical heroine), which means she has these characteristics:_____.
recount: Antigone does the following:_____ (e.g., breaks the law).
recognize or recall: Antigone and Ismene did the following: _____ (e.g., argued over whether to bury Polyneices or not) .
answer yes/no: Yes, Creon became the King of Thebes.

Higher Order:

analyze remembered info.: Haimon's position in the play lies between those of Creon and Antigone because _____.
relate: Antigone reminds me of _____ (someone you know, a character in another literary work.
This situation in the play reminds me of _____ (something that happened to me or someone I know, that happened in another work).
explain: Antigone is less kind to her living sister than to her dead brother because _____.
defend a choice: I defend this idea (above) based upon this reason in the play:_____.
hypothesize: I think the sentry compares Antigone to a mother bird because _____.
pose a problem: I think it is interesting that Sophocles never puts Antigone and Haimon in the same scene. [hypothesis: Maybe it is because _____.]
predict: I predict that Creon will destroy his family or I predict that the Chorus' attitude will change toward Antigone/Creon.

APPENDIX B: Cooperative Learning Group Roles (can be rotated):

* **Adversary:** encourages an alterative point of view to that of the group or offers resistance to consensus.
Sample questions: Can anyone cite an alternative response/ evidence? Does anyone disagree with the idea (or see a reason to disagree) that _____? What would you respond to the oppositeposition/idea? Let's look at this from an opposing or alternative perspective. How would you respond? Are both X and Y's evidence equally convincing? Explain.

* **Synthesizer:** looks for similarities in ideas, responses, interpretations.
Sample questions: Does it sound like X and Y are agreeing? Do these two pieces of evidence (or responses)support or contradict one another? How does X's response/evidence compare with Y's. How does X's interpretation compare with Y's? Are both equally convincing? Explain.

* **Caretaker:** keeps track of absentees, gives them make-up work, encourages quality work, completed tasks, full participation, and adherence to one's assigned role.

* **Record Keeper:** records daily notes, keeps the group folder up to date, tallies points (awarded for being on time, completing groups tasks, all contributing in proper role, staying on task, etc.).

* **Liaison:** when any member of the group has a question, s/he finds out if it can be answered by anyone in the group and, if not, asks the instructor to answer it.